

Was your bridge made in China?

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Abstract

Travel souvenirs are often approximations, or interpretations, of real places and things, specifically designed for the mass tourist market. Despite their cheapness and ubiquity they carry a powerful cultural narrative with them. The origins of these easily recognisable cultural narratives are complex, particularly as souvenirs are often not made in the place in which they are eventually sold, but represent. According to Susan Stewart, the souvenirs' *Narrative of Origins* has the power to miniaturise monuments, capture cultural emblems, and to fix the past in the present and this paper argues that it is in the nature of the souvenir to reconcile the apparent contradictions between national stereotypes and personal experience. Souvenirs encompass a dual narrative, both personal and cultural, they are shorthand for cultural indicators, and a means of buying what is not for sale.

This paper will consider the power of cultural stereotyping and cultural seepage in the development and design of souvenirs and how this creates a tension between these influences and notions of authenticity and veracity. Travel souvenirs are not expected to be authentic, but conversely, they are expected to represent the truth at some level. These representations are often lacking in nuance but as an iterative process of shifting content occurs through the attachment of personal narrative, the souvenir becomes imbued with complexity and personal value. The souvenir represents the past in the form of an incomplete symbol of what might be remembered, but this in turn is, fictionalised by the object itself.

Using examples of Ironbridge souvenirs, this paper will discuss what Lynne Falwell calls *Geographic Specificity* (2007), as well as exploring souvenirs as signifiers (Barthes), trophies (MacCannell), the fluid narrative content of souvenirs (Stewart, Baudrillard), and how they contribute to the making of complex personal and public histories.